

# Herbert Agar and *Free America*: A Jeffersonian Alternative to the New Deal

WILLIAM E. LEVERETTE, Jr and  
DAVID E. SHI

In analyzing the thought of the 1930s, historians have usually concentrated on the reactions of various liberal and leftist critics of Roosevelt's New Deal reform programs.<sup>1</sup> A few, however, have stressed that in opposition both to the New Deal's regulated welfare capitalism and to the left's many-faceted demands for a more openly radical program, the period also witnessed some significant theorizing that remained conservative and even reactionary.<sup>2</sup> Considerable attention, for instance, has been given to the Nashville Agrarians who in November 1930 published *I'll Take My Stand*, their ardent manifesto of Southern cultural independence from the capitalistic, urban-industrial north. Yet it is not so well known that the Jeffersonian social theory they espoused was the basis for a broader, national effort to promote the decentralization of American government and industry and to foster greater economic self-sufficiency through a wider distribution of property. For ten years, 1937-1947, the journal *Free America* served as an organ for

William E. Leverette, Jr is Professor of History at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina 29613. David E. Shi is Associate Professor of History at Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina 28036.

<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Alexander, *Nationalism in American Thought, 1930-1945* (Chicago, 1969); Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York, 1961); Paul K. Conkin, *The New Deal* (2nd ed., New York, 1975); R. Alan Lawson, *The Failure of Independent Liberalism, 1930-1941* (New York, 1971); William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963); Donald L. Miller, *The New American Radicalism: Alfred M. Bingham and Non-Marxian Insurgency in the New Deal Era* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1979); Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (New York, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Crunden, ed., *The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945* (Austin, 1977), and *From Self to Society, 1919-1941* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972).

this "decentralist" movement. Its contributors included social critics from various backgrounds and regions who proposed practical programs with clearly-articulated conservative philosophical underpinnings. Some of the Nashville Agrarians were among its supporters. The study of *Free America* and the decentralist ideas and programs associated with it not only provides insight into the essential nature of traditional American aspirations and experience but also attests to the energetic diversity of American social thought arising out of the crisis of the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

*Free America* appeared in January 1937 as the New Deal was drawing to an end as essentially unplanned as were many of its measures. Facing political opposition at home, President Roosevelt was becoming wary of growing dangers abroad. Paul Conkin has noted that during 1938 and 1939, as the pace of international events hastened toward war, the New Deal "simply petered out."<sup>4</sup> Many of the programs of the "second" New Deal were jettisoned or diluted in hopes of renewed stability and a revived sense of community.<sup>5</sup> Such a turn toward more conservative goals and values was also reflected in the emergence of *Free America*, whose editors and backers had long been committed to a simpler, pre-depression, even pre-industrial America, rooted in small-scale farming and business enterprises and the close community life they considered the essence of the nation's past.

Herbert Sebastian Agar, aristocrat, journalist, and historian, was the central figure in the founding of *Free America*. He was born in 1897 in New Rochelle, New York, but his father was descended from an old Louisiana family. Educated in a New Jersey prep school, Agar served in the Navy in World War I and later graduated with honors from Columbia. In 1922 he received a Ph.D. in English from Princeton and for the next six years taught English and history in a private school in New Jersey. In his spare time he published a novel and a volume of poems. With his second wife, Eleanor Carroll Chilton, herself an accomplished novelist, Agar wrote in 1929 a book of literary criticism, *The Garment of Praise*, in which he advocated a poetry of vision and prophecy, both for its own sake and for the

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Rock, "The Making and Meaning of *I'll Take My Stand*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1961), is the fullest treatment of the basic Agrarian book. Edward S. Shapiro, "Decentralist Intellectuals and the New Deal," *Journal of American History*, 58 (March 1972), 938-57 and "American Conservative Intellectuals, the 1930's, and the Crisis of Ideology," *Modern Age*, 23 (Fall 1979), 370-80. Shapiro covers some of the same issues as the present article but does not deal in detail with *Free America* as an organ devoted exclusively to decentralism. Louis Rubin Jr, "Introduction" to *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge, 1977) is a well-known commentary to the latest edition.

<sup>4</sup> Conkin, pp. 97, 98-102.

<sup>5</sup> Pells, pp. 282-364.

sake of "sermons against materialism." From 1928 until 1934, Agar lived in London, where he served as literary editor of the *English Review* and as correspondent for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, of which he would become editor in 1940. While in London, Agar developed an enduring affection for English culture, traditions, and politics, as witnessed by the fact that he chose to return there to live after World War II. He died in Sussex in 1980.

During the early Thirties Agar's interests turned from writing poetry and drama to politics and history. At this time his stance was vaguely conservative and critical of modern American economic and political institutions. As he later remarked, "I had known for years that in some way the America I loved was being strangled, and that it might not survive. But strangled by what?" He soon found the answer to his question in the "distributism" preached by the English Catholic writers and philosophers Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton. Under their influence his yet unformed social philosophy began to evolve. Both Belloc and Chesterton yearned for a pre-industrial society of organic harmony in accord with religious values. Crying out against the moral and material degradation of their time, they hated the limitations imposed by monopoly capitalism and the state on the individual's right to property. The dominating ideal behind their distributist philosophy was the restoration of a society controlled by Christian values and characterized by a widespread distribution of property in land, shops, and shareholding in small enterprises managed by the owners. Such a democracy of decent yeomen, craftsmen, and their families would provide a bulwark against the various centralist tendencies which threatened society in the industrial age.<sup>6</sup>

Agar found the distributist message preached by Belloc and Chesterton compelling, and he soon began contributing to their publications, eventually assuming an editorial position with Chesterton's *G.K.'s Weekly*. At the same time he explored the implications of their ideas for the American environment. In 1933 he published *The People's Choice*, a scathing history of the American presidency and American democracy. In it he idealized the Jeffersonian assumption that "a true democracy – safe against both communism and capitalistic exploitation – could be founded on the basis of landed interest." Unfortunately, he maintained, Jefferson the politician betrayed Jefferson the philosopher, and as President and party leader he compromised away his agrarian principles. As a result, Jeffersonian rhetoric

<sup>6</sup> Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London, 1913); Lawrence Clipper, *G. K. Chesterton* (New York, 1974); John P. McCarthy, *Hilaire Belloc: Edwardian Radical* (Indianapolis, 1978). Herbert Agar, "Private Property or Capitalism," *American Scholar*, 3 (Autumn 1934), 396–403.

and ideals were thereafter “grafted on to a greedy, middle-class Hamiltonian capitalism.” And as the nation grew richer in goods it grew poorer in values. The plutocrats of the industrial era systematically concentrated property ownership in a few hands, thus reducing the status of most citizens to that of propertyless wage slaves or tenants, and thereby making a mockery of democratic principles. The masses could vote, but they were so intimidated and manipulated that they voted as sheep rather than as citizens.<sup>7</sup>

As its receipt of the Pulitzer Prize attested, *The People's Choice* attracted considerable attention in the United States. John Chamberlain, then a leading leftist literary critic, drew a parallel between Agar and another American in England, calling Agar the “T. S. Eliot of political literature.” Other readers, however, were more sympathetic to Agar’s presentation. Allen Tate had been so impressed with *The People's Choice* that he had written a long congratulatory letter to Agar in London, and a regular and warm correspondence resulted. Tate assured Agar that despite the criticism heaped upon the Twelve Agrarians who wrote *I'll Take My Stand*, “Agrarianism is not dead. It is an old instinct waiting for its political philosophy to be restored.” Attracted to the program espoused by the Nashville Agrarians and determined to transplant in America the distributist ideal he had discovered in England, Agar described himself to Tate in 1933 as a Southerner at heart if not by birth. He wished, he wrote, to return to the United States and promote a kind of American distributism compatible with the basic concepts of the Vanderbilt University group. A year later he was back in America working for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, and he soon began articulating his social and economic proposals in the conservative *American Review*, edited by Seward Collins.<sup>8</sup>

An Ivy League intellectual, dilettante, and editor of the *Bookman*, Collins began the *American Review* in April 1933 to give voice to certain conservative opinions about politics, economics, literature, culture, and religion in a time beset by the clamorous and wrongheaded claims of both radical and capitalist propaganda. He built the *American Review* around his own “general right-wing mélange,” mainly economic in focus, including English distributists, Neo-Humanists, Catholic worshippers of medieval organic society, and American traditionalists, especially the Nashville Agrarians. For slightly over four years the magazine published a mixture of articles both bizarre and brilliant. Its conservatism was decidedly in opposition to the

<sup>7</sup> *The People's Choice: A Study in Democracy* (Boston, 1933), pp. 51, 55.

<sup>8</sup> John Chamberlain, “The Presidents We Deserve,” *Saturday Review*, 9 Sept. 1933, p. 93; Tate to Agar, 17 Nov. 1933, Allen Tate Papers, Princeton University (ATP); Agar to Tate, undated (1933), ATP.

direction American social theory was then taking, excluding, for example, finance capitalism as among acceptable alternatives but at times favoring a vaguely defined monarchism and Collins' own version of fascism. In addition, some articles were tinged with anti-semitism.<sup>9</sup>

Collins' coup was in capturing the support of the Nashville Agrarians by promising them a national forum for their ideas. As he wrote Donald Davidson, one of the founders and most consistent of the Agrarians: "I would like to have you think of the magazine as being in large measure your own; quite at your disposal for anything you care to say." He promised Davidson that the conservative stance of the *American Review* would not mean that all contributors had to take the same line. The Agrarians could state their conservative positions according to their individual predilections, and they duly availed themselves of this opportunity by publishing some sixty essays and reviews in the journal during the four years of its existence.<sup>10</sup> Other authors included T. S. Eliot, Hilaire Belloc, Ralph Borsodi, a New York proponent of small-scale homesteading for suburbanites, Irving Babbitt, the humanist critic, Ralph Adams Cram, medievalist and architect, and Herbert Agar.<sup>11</sup>

But the ties binding Agar, the Agrarians, and Collins quickly grew tenuous. As early as the summer of 1933 the Agrarian contributors to *American Review* were complaining of Collins' careless editorial habits, including irregular correspondence and payments. He seems to have been a man whose pronounced eccentricities often outweighed his charm. In July 1933, for instance, Frank Owsley wrote him a letter sympathizing with his "nervous breakdown," the same year in which Collins was in England for sessions with a medium and to contact the Society for Psychical Research. But for Agar particularly, the key issue was Collins' avowed, if wholly idiosyncratic "fascism" and monarchism, which gave Agar pause as early

<sup>9</sup> Albert E. Stone, Jr., "Seward Collins and the *American Review*: Experiment in Pro-Fascism, 1933-1937," *American Quarterly*, 12 (Spring 1960), 4-19.

<sup>10</sup> Collins to Davidson, 8 March 1933, Seward Collins Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University (SCP); Tate to Collins, 26 March 1933, SCP; Rock, "The Making . . . of *I'll Take My Stand*," p. 380. Representative examples of Agrarian contributions to *American Review* include Davidson, "'I'll Take My Stand': A History," 5 (Summer 1935), 301-21; Frank L. Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," 4 (March 1935), 529-47; John Crowe Ransom, "Happy Farmers," 1 (Oct. 1933), 513-35; Tate, "What Is Traditional Society?," 7 (Sept. 1936), 376-87.

<sup>11</sup> On Borsodi see William H. Issel, "Ralph Borsodi and the Agrarian Response to Modern America," *Agricultural History*, 41 (1967), 155-66; William E. Leverette, Jr and David E. Shi, "Agrarianism for Commuters," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 79 (Spring 1980), 202-18. On Cram and Babbitt see Crunden, *From Self to Society*.

as 1934, when he was developing his own ties with the Agrarians.<sup>12</sup>

On 10 December 1934 Agar revealed to Collins his desire to create a more effective organ to espouse distributist principles. He wanted within the next six years to gain influence over the New Deal "through capturing a big block of public opinion." Otherwise he put his hopes in a new political opposition to the "slave state" which he feared could emerge if the New Deal's programs were not informed by distributist ideals. To further these ends he suggested a quasi-political organization, using the *American Review* as an address, and a companion periodical, a weekly, to be published in some center between the South and West, but definitely not in New York (perhaps he meant Louisville). The editors should be in general agreement on broad issues, but the magazine should allow for divergences of opinion. He even suggested to Collins, who must have been shocked, that federal funding might be available for such a venture because of the New Deal's interest in promoting regional cultures. For the moment, however, neither Collins nor the Agrarians were willing to launch a new journal.<sup>13</sup>

Another project soon found Agar in 1935 urging Tate to help him interest the other Agrarians in publishing a symposium similar to *I'll Take My Stand*. The book, *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, appeared in 1936. The Agrarians did not then nor did Davidson later consider it the sequel they had wanted to follow *I'll Take My Stand*. But in many ways the second book paralleled the first, offering practical suggestions as to how best to carry out the program of *I'll Take My Stand*. Tate viewed the project as a way of attracting national support for their heretofore sectional program. "We can't go on writing our pleasant little laments for our own consumption," he stressed to Davidson, "we've got to get into action or admit that we are licked." Tate and Agar each contributed a chapter, and Agar wrote the introduction (eight of the original twelve Agrarians also participated). The volume included selections by British distributists (Belloc and Douglas Jerrold, editor of the *English Review*), Mary Shattuck Fisher, who discussed the role of the emancipated woman in a distributist society, and other decentralist critics of bigness in industry and government. Agar was obviously trying, as Davidson wrote later, to yoke agrarianism and distributism into one team. Agar had high hopes in the middle Thirties that such concepts could both solve the nation's economic troubles and restore its true values resting as they must on free

<sup>12</sup> Davidson to Owsley, 29 July 1933, Frank Owsley Papers, Joint University Libraries, Nashville (FOP); Owsley to Davidson, 5 Aug. 1933, Donald Davidson Papers, Joint University Libraries, Nashville (DDP); Owsley to Collins, 29 July 1933, SCP; Agar to Tate, 10 Dec. 1934, ATP.

<sup>13</sup> Agar to Collins, 10 Dec. 1934, SCP.

political institutions and individual economic independence for the majority.<sup>14</sup>

Always the moralist, Agar wrote in the book's introduction that any reform of American culture depended first on an ideal "that can stir the human heart." People who hated their country could hardly reform it – "a fact which our left-wing intellectuals tend to miss." He accused capitalists of prostituting American ideals for profit and communists of categorically denying American hopes out of a dogmatic belief in Marxist slogans. Under the present capitalist order, the majority of men were denied economic freedom, a stable family life, and creative and responsible work by purveyors of false economic doctrine disguised as free enterprise. The book's contributors, Agar claimed, shared "a belief that monopoly capitalism is evil and self-destructive, and it is possible, while preserving private ownership, to build a true democracy in which men would be better off both morally and physically, more likely to attain that inner peace which is the mark of a good life."<sup>15</sup>

In the same year, Agar severed his relations with the *American Review*, informing Collins in February that he did not want to be associated with various remarks the editor had made in a recent interview published in a minor communist journal, *Fight*, whose author, Grace Lumpkin, had implied that Collins' fascism and certain ideas of the Agrarians had philosophical affinities. He wrote Collins:

So, to avoid misunderstanding, I'd like to state that I do not want a king, that I do not want a return to the Middle Ages, that I do not want to abolish all factories, that I do not want to give "each person" a piece of land, and that I would die in order to diminish the chances of fascism in America. If you have really decided to appear before the public as a friend of fascism, you and I must be opponents to the end. If the only alternative were fascism (which it is not) I would welcome the Marxian way out.<sup>16</sup>

Collins himself became quite exercised over the case of "La Lumpkin." He was fearful of losing valued contributors and friends, and he publicly regretted that the Agrarians were branded fascist, a label he himself gladly wore, as he wrote in the *New Republic*. Tate had clarified his own position in the same journal a month before: "I am so deeply opposed to fascism that I should choose communism if it were the only alternative." Now, he, too, felt it necessary to sever connections with Collins. "However valiant he has been

<sup>14</sup> Tate to Davidson, 28 Sept. 1935, DDP; Agar to Davidson, 16 Sept. 1935, DDP; Agar to Owsley, 25 Sept., 6 Oct. 1935, FOP; Agar to Tate, 11 Oct. 1935, ATP; Davidson, "The 'Mystery' of the Agrarians," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 26 (23 Aug. 1943), 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> *Who Owns America? A Declaration of Independence* (Boston, 1936), pp. vi–x.

<sup>16</sup> Agar to Collins, 15 Feb. 1936, SCP. See also Agar to Tate, 15 Feb. 1936, ATP.

in the cause," Tate stressed to Davidson, "we can't let him make us Fascists when the big plank in our platform is that we are offering the sole alternative to Fascism."<sup>17</sup>

For his part Agar intensified his efforts to found a new journal separate from Collins'. The publication of *Who Owns America?* had stimulated the interest of several northern intellectuals in distributism, especially a group in New York calling themselves the "Independent Americans." They included Ralph Borsodi, Chard Powers Smith, a writer and proponent of agrarianism, Bertram Fowler, a leading figure in the cooperative movement, and Chauncey Stillman, a wealthy New Yorker who had been the financial backer for several of Borsodi's middle-class homestead communities. Soon they were joined by representatives of the Catholic rural life movement, cooperative leagues, and latter-day followers of Henry George's single-tax program. Through Agar's initiative these groups began communicating with the Nashville Agrarians about forging a national organization and publication to promote distributist principles. Initially the prospects for such an alliance seemed promising. Earlier Tate had told Davidson that Agar "is a gift from the Gods. He is a born public figure; he is intelligent; and he is with us to the hilt. He is just what we needed. He is a leader, and not one of us is a leader that anybody will follow. We are an army made up of generals."<sup>18</sup>

By December 1936, however, the willingness of the Agrarian "generals" to follow Agar's lead had begun to wane. In that month Agar learned that they were unwilling to commit themselves as fully to his new publication as they had to *American Review*. The Nashville group clearly claimed a proprietary interest in the decentralist (the term now preferred) movement and was unwilling to loosen its grip. As Tate emphasized, "I cannot see our position as a single contribution to a more inclusive position for as I see it we are the center to which other various movements must be drawn." If the *American Review* had been too fascistic for them, Agar's proposed new substitute was too pluralistic, and some of the southerners were openly suspicious of his new northern allies. For the Agrarians, New York remained the hated symbol of finance capitalism, and the possible location of the editorial offices of Agar's new venture in Manhattan was a sore point.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, "The Sunny Side of Fascism," *New Republic*, 19 June 1936, pp. 131-32; Tate, "Fascism and the Southern Agrarians," *New Republic*, 27 May 1936, p. 75; Tate to Davidson, 23 Feb. 1936, DDP. See also Tate to Collins, 23 May 1936, Collins to Davidson, 21 May 1936, Malcolm Cowley to Tate, 28 Feb. 1936, SCP.

<sup>18</sup> Tate to Davidson, 28 Sept. 1935, DDP. On the Catholic rural life movement see Edward S. Shapiro, "Catholic Agrarian Thought and the New Deal," *Catholic Historical Review*, 65 (Oct. 1979), 583-99.



Another problem hindering the proposed coalition was that many of the leading Agrarians were now dispersed around the country at various colleges and universities, already turning to interests in scholarship and literature, and finding satisfactory outlets in such journals as the new *Southern Review*.<sup>19</sup>

Events moved rapidly in late 1936, and the correspondence among the principals indicates that Ralph Borsodi's contacts with Stillman settled certain basic financial problems so that *Free America* could become a fact in early 1937.<sup>20</sup> Its editors included Agar, Borsodi, Stillman, Fowler, Katherine Gauss Jackson, and Chard Powers Smith – all from above the Mason-Dixon line. Upon seeing the first issue (January 1937) of *Free America*, Tate wrote Collins that "it is rotten." That same month he told Agar that some of the Agrarians were still loyal to Collins for originally giving them a national voice. He did feel that the conservative press could include two journals, but *Free America* could not claim to be "a group organ." Collins blamed Agar for dividing the American distributists and Agrarians, and the *American Review* ceased publication later in the year. In a letter to Hilaire Belloc he contended that the split "might be said to center around the personality and work of Herbert Agar. . . . Many of us thought he was the Heaven-sent leader of the Distributist movement in this country. But shortly thereafter he began to express ideas. . . which caused me and others grave concern and have latterly caused a real division."<sup>21</sup>

The theme of the first number of *Free America* was that Agrarianism, distributism, the Catholic rural life movement, and the consumer cooperative movement could be fused to provide America a decentralist alternative to the Depression and the New Deal that embodied democratic traditions, retaining freedom of choice for average citizens while avoiding the centralizing evils of finance capitalism, socialism, or communism. Bertram Fowler, for example, argued that consumer cooperatives gave people ownership and control of the stores, factories, and services that met their needs and thus were a means of satisfying the distributist demand for widespread ownership of property. Ralph Borsodi explained that the goal of his homesteading program conducted by the School of Living he had founded in Suffern, New

<sup>19</sup> Tate to Agar, 9 Dec. 1936, ATP.

<sup>20</sup> By correspondence with Chauncey Stillman and Agar in 1978, the authors learned that neither kept any records from their *Free America* associations. The Collins Papers include an Agar file, and the Tate, Davidson, and Owsley Papers also contain correspondence relating to the magazine and its contributors. (Most of the Agrarians other than Tate, Davidson, and Owsley did not contribute to *Free America*.)

<sup>21</sup> Tate to Collins, 27 Jan. 1937, SCP; Tate to Agar, 7 Jan. 1937, ATP; Tate to Owsley, 20, 26 Nov. 1937, FOP; Collins to Belloc, 11 Feb. 1937, SCP.

York, was to free urban and suburban families from the one-crop agribusiness that supplied their food, and thus give them a very basic independence.<sup>22</sup>

Agar wrote *Free America's* initial statement of the principles he considered necessary to restore America's freedoms, including social and economic stability guaranteed by small-scale commercial and agrarian enterprises, decentralized government and industry, and a widespread distribution of property, especially land. American democracy was not only a political system, he affirmed, but a way of life, "a certain quality of life, a certain set of values." Despite considerable differences in motivation and outlook, all contributors believed that "without economic democracy there can be neither social nor political democracy." Modest about *Free America's* possible influence but clear about its objectives, Agar insisted that its program was not a ready-made "blue-print for the revolution that is needed if American democracy is to endure," but was proposed as a forum for high principles which could indeed be put into practice. In closing he stressed that "it is our pride that we cannot make peace with plutocracy, or with collectivism, or with any form of tyranny."<sup>23</sup>

*Free America's* decentralist program was succinctly expressed on the masthead adopted by July of its first year:

*Free America* stands for individual freedom and believes that freedom can exist only in societies in which the great majority are the effective owners of tangible and productive property and in which group action is democratic. In order to achieve such a society, ownership, production, population, and government must be decentralized. *Free America* is therefore opposed to finance-capitalism, fascism, and communism.

The unsatisfactory nature of such alternatives was usually explained in *Free America* as the result of flaws inherent in all societies which had become industrial and urban, and hence inhuman, whatever their outward form. Indeed, for most writers, and especially Agar, an economic system was to be judged primarily by ethical standards rather than by its productive efficiency alone.

Judged by these criteria, all the major alternative economic programs failed. Economies that denied land, the natural source of production, or the opportunity for small business and manufacturing enterprises to the average

<sup>22</sup> Borsodi made clear his opposition to government-sponsored back-to-the-land movements, a favorite aim of the New Deal, under several agencies. See Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, 1959); Jacob H. Dorn, "Subsistence Homesteading in Dayton, Ohio, 1933-1935," *Ohio History* (Spring 1969), pp. 75-93.

<sup>23</sup> *Free America*, I (Jan. 1937), 12, 14-16. (Hereafter *FA*.)

person, were infringements of fundamental human liberties. In addition, big business did not satisfy its own boast of increased efficiency. The factory system itself denied to most men the choice of pleasing and varied work, a deprivation compounded by the worker's having to exchange his time for wages and salaries at the behest of those who controlled the individual and allowed only that work furnish income for meeting basic economic needs. The consumer's choices were manipulated by a vicious advertising and distribution system dictated by the constant need to dispose of the bloated production of runaway technology and specialized agriculture. Mass-produced goods themselves were shabby, adulterated, and often unnecessary. In addition, the factory system denied the choice of homes in healthful and aesthetically satisfying surroundings, forcing people to live in deplorable urban environments. The indictment thus encompassed not only how men made a living, but how they lived, a question of quality, not quantity. In Agar's view the optimum human living had to include individual control over choices, time for leisure and work, associations with family and a close community, and contact with the evergreen psychological, spiritual and material resources of nature.<sup>24</sup>

To Agar America's problems resulted primarily from the betrayal of the Jeffersonian ideal of a nation in which small property holders predominated. Instead, property had become the prerogative of monopolizing capitalism. Concepts like freedom were prostituted to protect the interests of the few, whereas the many were seduced by promises of security, or higher wages, or the illusion that higher wages alone would mean a better standard of living. The Great Depression had dimmed even these hopes, so that perfunctory political exercises in democratic "choice" were meaningless. In the Twenties, ownership of property in stocks, so highly touted as a sign of prosperity, had not offered the same ownership as effective management and control of one's own tangible, productive property, and the Depression had proved such paper ownership illusory. Tate underscored this point in a review of Agar's *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1938), a rather bittersweet history of American idealism focusing on the Democratic party. Agar hoped to arrest the party's disturbing decline from Jeffersonian principles. Tate endorsed Agar's insistence that Jeffersonian ideals meant "a system of property in

<sup>24</sup> "Editorials," *FA*, 1 (March 1937), 3-5, and 4 (Dec. 1940), 2, 14; Borsodi, "Fallacy of Mass Production," 1 (Feb. 1937), 1-2; "Democracy, Plutocracy, Bureaucracy," 3 (Aug. 1939), 10-11; "Family or Factory," 2 (Nov. 1938), 3-6; Graham Carey, "Sufficiency, Security and Freedom," 3 (Jan. 1939), 3-5; Raymond Parsons, "The Garden City Plans," 4 (April 1940), 12; Thomas H. Haile, "The Cause and Cure of Unemployment," 4 (May 1940), 7-9; Agar, "A Time for Greatness," 6 (Sept. 1942), 6.

which ownership is so widely distributed that the owners do not merely clip coupons under a red umbrella on the Riviera, but are compelled to exert responsible moral control over the means of production that they happen to own.”<sup>25</sup>

This moral view of economic activity was well illustrated in an exchange in *Free America* between Agar and Lewis Corey, a prominent Marxist social critic. Corey chided the distributists for lacking a sense of practicality and history, despite the soundness of their values and their opposition to the injustices of capitalism. The nation of small property holders which they idealized, he observed, had perhaps existed in 1820, but could not be restored. At most, Corey thought, only one fourth of the working population, including those who already held various kinds and amounts of property, could ever effectively be free property holders. It was not monopoly capitalism (the inevitable antecedent of fascism) but capitalism as such that was inimical to the full development of human beings in a democratic society, a value that Corey upheld as much as did Agar’s distributist and agrarian cohorts. But Agar countered that the issue was not simply an economic one, not solely a question of changing institutional arrangements. There might be economic expedients, even truths, but principles were not quantifiable or scientific – “economics knows nothing of justice.” Agar of course meant the discipline of economics, because he went on to affirm the moral supremacy of an economic order of small property holdings over any centralized alternative. Denial of this ideal was contrary to the “moral nature of man.” Agar had emphasized this same point several years earlier when he wrote *Land of the Free* (1935), an eloquent plea for a return to small property ownership in America. The work’s theme was that the country needed a moral housecleaning. “The morals of a society,” Agar declared, “determine the limits within which the economic system must move.”<sup>26</sup>

The distributists and Agrarians supporting *Free America* thus saw the crisis of the 1930s as political, economic, and moral in nature. They wanted decentralization of finance, industry, and agriculture, and a restoration of widespread private property and free enterprise. Their revolutionary alternative would not be the New Deal welfare state, socialist economic collectiv-

<sup>25</sup> *FA*, 2 (Oct. 1938), 17. Lewis Corey also commented, from a Marxist perspective, on the illusory nature of paper holdings. He claimed that of the 3.3 million stockholders in the United States in the 1920s, only 0.5% were wage workers. See his *The Decline of American Capitalism* (New York, 1934), 335.

<sup>26</sup> Corey, “A Marxist Looks at Distributism,” *FA*, 1 (March 1937), 8–10; Agar, “The Marxian Myth,” *ibid.*, 11–12. For defenses of distributism from charges of fascism see Hoffman Nickerson, “Distributism or Democracy?” 1 (Aug. 1937), 5–7 and Borsodi’s rebuttal, *ibid.*, 7–9. On Corey, see Pells, *Radical Visions*, pp. 91–95; Agar, *The Land of the Free* (Boston, 1935), p. 264.

ism, or fascist political dictatorship, but a conservatism almost radical in its implications, a Jeffersonian cure for the ills of twentieth-century society. The nature of the crisis at hand demanded that property “be *restored*, not protected.”

Agar and the editors of *Free America* articulated their diagnosis of the country's problems with considerable clarity and force, and they soon were able to attract a number of distinguished contributors to support their decentralist goals. Donald Davidson, despite his reservations about *Free America's* northern connections, contributed a number of essays and book reviews. Dorothy Day, the tireless, impassioned editor of the *Catholic Worker*, explained how the Catholic rural life movement promoted the cause of decentralism through the regeneration of both human beings and the use of America's land. Academic humanist Stringfellow Barr, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, wrote an essay demonstrating that the values of a classical education – individual discipline, controlled choice, and respect for quality – were implicit in the independent economics of decentralism and self-help because a thinking person would naturally want to be as self-sufficient as possible. Arthur Morgan, director of the Tennessee Valley Authority, wrote persuasively on the virtue of small communities and cooperatives and explained that balanced rural living was neither narrowly provincial nor necessarily limited to drudgery.<sup>27</sup>

The ideal decentralist society that the contributors and editors envisioned was certainly an attractive one. Few would deny the desirability of a society where none were very rich and none very poor and where industrial and financial growth was regulated according to an efficiency geared to human needs. It would also be better for more Americans to own their own homes and to control more directly their means of production. But how this ideal society was to be achieved was less clear and convincing. The always troublesome question of means obviously gave Agar and other editors some discomfort. As one editorial stressed, *Free America* “will preach mostly principles and broad economic doctrines, and will be chary of specific proposals for putting these principles and doctrines into effect.” At times the editors, paradoxically, were willing to support the use of government action to achieve their decentralist objectives. They recognized that the state must play an important regulatory role, even in a decentralized society. Agar emphasized that it would be unrealistic to expect that all forms of industrial activity could or should be reduced in size. If some large-scale enterprises

<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Day, “Catholic Agrarian Notes,” *FA*, I (Feb. 1937), 13; Stringfellow Barr, “Freedom Through Discipline,” *ibid.*, 6 (Sept. 1942), 7–10; Arthur Morgan, “Design for a Small Community,” *ibid.* (Feb. 1942), 3–6.

proved their efficiency, *Free America* would accept them, but the government in such cases should have large supervisory powers. The penalty for bigness would be regulation.<sup>28</sup>

On the subject of the New Deal's efforts at government planning, the decentralists were divided and ambivalent. Some, like Donald Davidson and Ralph Borsodi, opposed virtually every government-sponsored program. Agar and the majority of the editors, however, distinguished between different types of planning. Agar criticized the defunct National Recovery Administration, for example, because in order for it to have worked, "compulsion must be complete in the Nazi or Russian manner: jails and purges and secret police and all the bloody paraphernalia of tyranny." On the other hand, he and *Free America* generally supported the TVA, although it too required a degree of government compulsion. In this case, however, such compulsion was justified since "the government cannot change the productive capacity of an entire area without running hard against existing interests."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the TVA did not entail either detailed planning or minute supervision of individual citizens. On the contrary, it opened the way for citizens to become more free and more equal by making possible a large increase in individual ownership of the means of production. For the same reasons, *Free America* supported the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act passed in 1937, which was designed to enable some of the 13,000,000 tenant farmers across the country to become land owners by providing low interest loans.<sup>30</sup>

Yet even as they advocated the temporary use of the federal government to achieve Jeffersonian ends, Agar and his associates remained intensely suspicious of the state. As Borsodi emphasized, governments "are the worst instruments for experimenting with fundamental social reforms to which society might turn."<sup>31</sup> Too often it seemed that the New Deal, while stimulated by the right motives, was in practice producing the wrong results.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., I (June 1937), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Agar, *A Time for Greatness* (New York, 1942), pp. 169, 170.

<sup>30</sup> On the Bankhead bill see "Editorial," *FA*, I (April 1937), 4. Representative articles on the New Deal include: Davidson, "An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal," 2 (Dec. 1938), 3-5; Borsodi, "Planning: For What?" 3 (Dec. 1939), 16-18, and "The Changing Order," 4 (Jan. 1940), 18. On attitudes about the implications of electrical power for rural life see D. Clayton Brown, *Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA* (Westport, Conn., 1980). Borsodi was a great champion of domesticated, small scale technology and electricity. See Leverette and Shi, "Agrarianism for Commuters." The Agrarians themselves had mixed reactions toward the TVA, as Edward Shapiro indicates in "The Southern Agrarians and the Tennessee Valley Authority," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Winter 1970), 791-806.

<sup>31</sup> Borsodi, "Homestead Notes," *FA*, I (Feb. 1937), 12.

Despite Roosevelt's claims to the contrary, the indirect result of the New Deal was an intolerable centralization of government and increased concentration of capital and business. *Free America's* editors and supporters would have preferred to promote decentralism through state laws providing tax exemptions for homesteads up to twenty acres and tax penalties for absentee ownership of land. All the while, they insisted that their willingness to support government action at whatever level was not inconsistent with decentralist principles. "We are not altogether anarchists," one editorial affirmed.<sup>32</sup>

Nor were they advocating a completely decentralized economy. In their fantasies they might have preferred a pure distributist society, but in reality they were willing to settle for a mixed economy made up of the "classic" capitalism of small businessmen and farmers, the state socialism of government owned natural monopolies, and the regulated finance capitalism of the mass production industries. They understandably placed most of their emphasis on the "classic" capitalism of small producers utilizing local production techniques, since this was the form of economic activity best designed to "create a large class of citizens with a sense of real participation in economic life, factory workers living in their own homes, enjoying the sun and air, trees and grass, of which suburban conditions have deprived so many."<sup>33</sup>

Although Agar and the editors of *Free America* were willing to accept government support to achieve such a decentralist society, they preferred private initiative at a grassroots level. "The first point to make clear," Agar stressed, "is that we must not simply run to Washington and ask for a lot of new laws. To be sure, before our task is finished, we shall have to change a few of our laws. . . . But our first, and at all times our chief, duty is to go to the people and convince them that they want the historic American system for moral reasons." And it was to this end that *Free America* directed its message, trying to convince readers that by voluntarily reducing their dependence on government and finance capitalism and by increasing their own self-sufficiency through domestic production, cooperatives, and subsistence farming, they could restore more individual freedom and thereby reverse what many claimed were the inevitable trends of history. The editors realized that it was impossible for everyone to become a yeoman farmer. But they emphasized that many more Americans could learn to live simpler and more self-sustaining lives, with the assistance of modern technology. "We want every man or family at worst to be able to provide for

<sup>32</sup> "Editorials," *ibid.* (Feb. 1937), 5.

<sup>33</sup> John P. Chamberlain, "Principles of Decentralization," *FA*, 3 (Dec. 1939), 6.

themselves – with the help, incidentally, of every conceivable gadget of modern machinery – not to depend upon the government to provide for them.”<sup>34</sup>

Such was the basic philosophy and program espoused in *Free America* in the early years of its existence. Agar’s dream of forging a national coalition of distributists and Agrarians, however, was never realized. The various movements making up the alliance never truly merged, and *Free America* gradually gave up its attempt to fuse them together under a single organizing scheme. After 1939 the journal was less a forum for doctrinal discussion and more a clearing house for the various activities associated with decentralism and agrarianism around the country. A typical issue might contain an uplifting editorial or an occasional philosophical piece, but the bulk of the journal would be devoted to personal experience articles detailing some experiment in self-sufficiency, including practical advice on such mundane matters as subsistence gardening, canning, baking and otherwise preparing food in the home, the uses of firewood, the construction of homes or other buildings, the organization of communities or cooperatives of various kinds. Each issue also contained brief updates on homesteading activities, the Catholic rural life movement, and the promotion of small businesses and cooperatives at home and abroad.

Agar’s attempt to develop a national coalition with decentralism as a unifying force was further retarded by the advent of war in Europe, which shattered, for the moment, the hopes of a return to the society of small farms, small businesses, and small communities that *Free America* espoused. The exigencies of war produced a powerful centralizing force. *Free America*’s editors were fully aware of the threat to their social vision, and the magazine was increasingly filled with misgivings about the clearly imminent American involvement in the war.<sup>35</sup> But to many decentralists, fascism came to represent a greater menace. This was true especially for Agar, who visited London in 1940 during the height of the German air raids and came away convinced of the necessity of immediate American military intervention. To that end he helped found Freedom House, an organization designed to promote American support for Great Britain in her time of crisis.

While Agar continued to believe that economic liberty was the foundation of a politically free society, events in Europe caused him to appreciate the

<sup>34</sup> Agar, *Land of the Free* (Boston, 1935), p. 262; “Editorials,” *FA*, 1 (Feb. 1937), 3–4. On the uses of technology see Peter Van Dresser, *Free America*’s leading writer on the subject: “Growing Up to Technics,” *FA*, 1 (Feb. 1937), 9–12; “The Technics of Decentralization,” 2 (June 1938), 10–12; “An Agrarian Looks at Planning,” 3 (April 1939), 13–15; “Humanizing the Machine,” 3 (June 1939), 13–15.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, “Editorial,” *FA*, 5 (May 1941), 2; 5 (June 1941), 2–17.



primacy of political and civil freedoms. After Pearl Harbor, he and most others writing in *Free America* took the position that the political tyranny of fascism required a massive national effort, even if it proved inimical to their decentralist philosophy. As one editorial affirmed: "While *Free America* has never taken kindly to 'national planning' schemes we are ready to scrap any prejudice in war time."<sup>36</sup> Some even advocated large-scale, planned agricultural programs to support the war effort and to feed the postwar world during the reconstruction which would inevitably follow the war. Yet it also seems that *Free America's* writers, for the most part, while seeing the war against totalitarianism as necessary, hoped that its purposes might be meshed with the causes of decentralism and rural and community self-sufficiency. If, as Dorothy Thompson wrote, youth could be taught the virtues of co-operation and agriculture in the Volunteer Land Corps, if people in cities had to be dispersed for their own physical safety and cities were thus indirectly decentralized, as Lewis Mumford suggested, if small businesses could be revived to produce for the war and if the virtues of sacrifice and frugality might be revived, then the war's bad tendencies might be turned to good. "No longer," the editors maintained, "are we to buy more, sell more, eat more, wear more."<sup>37</sup>

Their hopes of the war producing a significant change in the modern American worship of consumption and bigness, however, proved illusory. In the aftermath of the conflict the country quickly clamored for a return to growth and affluence. And in the face of this reality, *Free America* finally ceased publication early in 1947, ostensibly for financial reasons but undoubtedly also because of the lack of sufficient national support for its ideas. Thereafter the various groups and individuals associated with the journal began to split up, each pursuing separate programs with little hope for any national decentralist movement taking root. As one contributor admitted in the last issue, the "parallel movements interested in distributism in 1936 remain parallel today – headed in the same direction but never really meeting as one."<sup>38</sup> Agar remained in England after the war, devoting most of his time and writings to promoting international cooperation to strengthen democratic principles in the face of Communism. His earlier trenchant criticism of American political and economic institutions had been strongly

<sup>36</sup> "Editorial," *FA*, 6 (May 1942), 15.

<sup>37</sup> See Bertram Fowler, "Food for Victory," *FA*, 6 (March 1942), 3–6; Dorothy Thompson, "The Volunteer Land Corps," 6 (June 1942), 3–7; Lewis Mumford, "Decentralization: The Outlook for 1941," 5 (Jan. 1941), 15; Wright Patman, "Post-War Domestic Economy and Decentralization," 7 (Winter 1943), 16–17.

<sup>38</sup> John P. Chamberlain, "Looking Backward: Ten Years of *Free America*," *FA*, 10 (Winter 1946–47), 12.

tempered by the aggression of fascism and the threat of Communism, and he now began writing studies of American political thought and practices that were much more appreciative in tone.<sup>39</sup>

The Nashville Agrarians, Agar, and the decentralists spoke for something fundamental to the American experience. The Agrarians typically expressed their nostalgia for a lost pastoral and Jeffersonian America as a metaphorical literary ideal. Agar and the groups associated with *Free America* were also motivated by an abiding moralism, a quixotically traditional assumption that a good society requires that the majority be economically independent and therefore politically free. In this sense freedom and independence did not connote isolation from or antagonism toward society but instead presupposed socially "responsible" economic and political behavior. What distinguished *Free America's* program from that of the Nashville Agrarians was its conscious attempt to make metaphor reality.

*Free America* failed to achieve its goal of a national decentralist movement primarily because Americans between 1937 and 1947 were either too busy or too sceptical to listen. Agar and the editors did not miss this reality. They admitted in 1945: "The American people have not suddenly become converts to the credo that appears at the *Free America* masthead; the editors do not delude themselves by thinking that is likely to happen before the millennium." They recognized, however, that "decentralization is no longer a voice crying in the wilderness."<sup>40</sup> Today this claim seems to have increasing validity, as external necessity is forcing more and more Americans to examine seriously their manner of living, and in the process many are adopting alternatives long considered quaint, impractical, or antiquated. Judging by the extraordinary success of *Mother Earth News*, in some respects the contemporary counterpart of *Free America*, the decentralist ideal of greater self-sufficiency is indeed still alive. Small is again beautiful for many Americans, and the resurgence of Jeffersonian political and economic values has helped to renew interest in agrarianism and decentralism.<sup>41</sup> For those concerned with the continuing appeal of this kind of modern Jeffersonianism, the pages of *Free America* provide a necessary starting point.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *The Price of Union* (Boston, 1950); *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1952); *The Price of Power: America since 1945* (Chicago, 1957).

<sup>40</sup> "Editorial," *FA*, 9 (Winter 1945), 2.

<sup>41</sup> On the contemporary trend toward decentralism and agrarianism see Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell, "Voluntary Simplicity: Lifestyle of the Future," *Futurist*, 11 (Aug. 1977), 200-10; Carter Henderson, "Living the Simple Life," *Human Resource Management*, 16 (Fall 1977), 23-29; Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York, 1980); E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York, 1973).